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RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE PRIORITY 0039
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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 000811

SIPDIS

PRAGUE PASS TO RFE/RL JEFF GEDMIN/JULIA RAGONA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/02/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [BBG](#) [RFE](#) [RL](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR SPEAKS TO RFE/RL HEAD ON NEW YEREVAN
BUREAU CHIEF

REF: A. YEREVAN 779 B. YEREVAN 758 C. YEREVAN 753

Classified By: AMB Marie L.Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Ambassador Yovanovitch expressed her concern to RFE/RL Director Jeffrey Gedmin regarding the recent appointment of Aghasi Yenokyan as Yerevan Bureau Chief of RFE/RL. Gedmin acknowledged that the selection of Yenokyan might present challenges, but said that Yenokyan deserved a chance to prove himself. If he did not live up to RFE/RL standards, RFE/RL would take the necessary steps. Gedmin made several constructive suggestions to allay GOAM concerns and we will follow up with both the GOAM and RFE/RL. Post nonetheless anticipates that this issue may soon present difficulties not only in our bilateral relationship, but for RFE/RL. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Yovanovitch reached RFE/RL Director Jeffrey Gedmin on October 1 regarding the recent appointment of Aghasi Yenokyan as Bureau Chief of Radio Liberty in Yerevan. She reiterated concerns expressed in her recent letter to Gedmin (see ref A), especially the problem with perception of bias that is arising because of Yenokyan's past membership in the Impeachment Bloc opposition Party, and his identification by the public and the GOAM with the anti-government movement.

¶3. (C) Gedmin took the point, but said he felt obligated to honor Yenokyan's contract and give the new bureau chief a fair chance to prove himself on the job. He noted that Yenokyan must adhere to RFE/RL's standards of accuracy and objectivity. If he fails to meet those standards, Gedmin assured the Ambassador that RFE/RL would correct the matter. The Ambassador noted that, because of Yenokyan's background, the bar would be higher than usual for Yenokyan and how the government and the public perceive his performance. Gedmin asked that post encourage Armenian authorities to document carefully, in writing and in context, specific examples that support their concerns about bias in RFE/RL programs.

¶4. (C) Gedmin asked if there was a constructive way to engage in "confidence building" measure with the GOAM in a proactive manner, for example, giving the Foreign Minister some time on the air. He also suggested inviting a government official to Prague to discuss the matter. Gedmin floated the possibility of RFE/RL establishing an ombudsman, an individual of integrity acceptable to all parties, to address concerns by the government or other Armenians about Radio Liberty programming. The Ambassador agreed that this would be a promising gesture to reassure local authorities. The Ambassador suggested that it might be useful to travel to Yerevan and meet with government officials as well. Ambassador said that the Embassy would follow up with both the GOAM and RFE/RL.

¶5. (C) Comment: We understand RFE/RL's reluctance to reverse

a personnel decision that has already been made and the need to give the new bureau chief a chance to prove himself through performance. We also appreciate Doctor Gedmin's willingness to think creatively about constructive steps to mitigate this serious appearance problem, now that RFE/RL finds itself committed to this course. We will work with the GOAM and RFE/RL to explore these ideas. While we hope for the best, our experience suggests that this decision will likely kick off a new barrage of government complaints about Radio Liberty's alleged bias. We continue to stand ready to defend RFE/RL against unfounded attacks, but we expect the Yenokyan decision will present difficulties not just for the U.S. - but for RFE/RL.

YOVANOVITCH